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ABSTRACT

Many Canadians are concerned about the quality of reading instruction in Canadian schools. Recent newspaper articles, research reviews, and newsletter articles reflect the nature of these concerns. The official instructional policy in a number of provinces as well as in a number of local school districts is based on a whole-language philosophy. The major emphasis across Canada is on the top-down whole-language approach instead of the bottom-up, phonics, or code-emphasis approach to reading. Although it is widely recognized that whole-language programs contain a number of features that can benefit children in many ways, the accumulated evidence suggests that whole language may not be appropriate for all children and that for some children, it may even lead to serious reading problems. Ministries of education across Canada should provide school districts with a balanced selection of offerings in the language arts curriculum, and school psychologists should encourage teachers, primary consultants, etc. to select beginning reading materials that match children's needs. (Contains 21 references.) (RS)

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Beginning Reading Instruction: A Position Paper on Beginning Reading Instruction in Canadian Schools

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There is little question that many Canadians are concerned about the quality of reading instruction in Canadian schools. Recent articles expressing this concern have appeared in major newspapers such as The Globe and Mail, The London Free Press, and The Toronto Star in the form of feature stories (Gerard, 1992; Teachen, 1992), commentaries (e.g., Nikiforuk, 1991), and letters to the editor (e.g., Cumming, 1992). Similar articles, but in the form of research reviews, have also appeared in Canadian journals such as Orbit (Vanderwolf, 1991) and Exceptionality Education Canada (Willows, 1991) as well as in limited circulation newsletters issued by provincial organizations such as The Organization for Quality Education (Groff, 1992) and in newsletters from provincial chapters of national organizations such as the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (Weiner, 1992).

During the 1991 annual general meeting of the Educational and School Psychology Section of the Canadian Psychological Association, the nature of these concerns was discussed at some

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length and it was recommended that the Section develop a position paper that would deal with one of the major factors responsible for the concerns, namely, that the official instructional policy in a number of provinces as well as in a number of local school districts in Canada is based on a whole-language philosophy (Weaver, 1990). The final draft of the paper, which appears below, was approved by the Section in June, 1992 and was endorsed by the Board of Directors of the Canadian Psychological Association in November, 1992. It is the Section's hope that the ministries (departments) of education in Canada will act to correct the problem identified in the paper. It is also the Section's hope that the educational publishing firms in Canada will work to develop beginning reading programs that contain a more effective blend of phonics-based and whole-language-based materials than are now available to Canadian educators.

Position Paper - Background

Two general approaches have emerged from the lengthy and often acrimonious debate over how best to teach young children to read. The first and perhaps oldest is known as a bottom-up, phonics, or code-emphasis approach to reading. Teachers who use this approach usually begin by having children associate sounds with individual letters and letter combinations. The children are then taught the strategy of sounding out or decoding words. They are also taught when to use this strategy in combination with various rules in

order to overcome certain exceptions to general sounding out principles. The second approach, referred to as top-down or meaning-emphasis, is found today mostly in programs that make use of whole-language procedures. Here the teaching of decoding skills is de-emphasized. Instead, children are taught to recognize words largely by appearance and to focus on the overall meaning of a story together with story context cues such as pictures to help them with words that may be difficult to read.

In view of the controversy that continues to surround beginning reading instruction (see, for example, McKenna, Robinson, & Miller, 1990; Stahl, Osborn, & Lehr, 1990; Vellutino, 1991), it is disconcerting to learn that, at present, the major emphasis across Canada is on the top-down approach. Specifically, the ministry or department of education in each province is authorized to issue a list of approved textbooks for use in all areas of the curriculum. The Language Arts (reading) textbooks approved for use in each province in grades one through three are given in Table 1. As the information in this table reveals, in seven provinces (British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland/Labrador, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Quebec) the only textbooks on the approved lists are those that subscribe to a whole-language philosophy. In the remaining provinces whole-language accounts for approximately 75% of the textbooks on the approved lists.

Although it is widely recognized that whole-language programs contain a number of features that can benefit children in many ways (Chaney, 1990; Fox, 1986; Froese, 1990; Heymsfeld, 1989), the accumulated evidence suggests that whole-language may not be appropriate for all children and that for some children, it may even lead to serious reading problems. In particular, children at risk for reading failure as well as those from disadvantaged backgrounds who lack prerequisite literacy skills often require more structure and greater emphasis on phonics than most whole-language programs provide (Bateman, 1991; Berninger, Thalberg, DeBruyn, & Smith, 1987; Carnine, Silbert, & Kameenui, 1990; Chall, 1989; Chaney, 1990; Oakhill & Garnham, 1988; Stahl & Miller, 1989; Stahl, Osborn, & Lehr, 1990). Unfortunately, in many provinces unless special permission is granted to do otherwise, schools are only permitted to purchase in quantity for classroom use textbooks that appear on the approved lists. Hence, by denying teachers easy access to other reading programs, provinces that only authorize the use of whole-language materials may be preventing school districts with large numbers of disadvantaged children from providing these children with beginning reading programs that are more appropriately geared to meeting the children's needs.

Position Statements

While it is not the intention of the Educational and School Psychology Section to promote one approach to teaching reading over another, the Section does feel that there is a need for greater choice on the lists of approved textbooks issued by the provinces. The Section is also concerned that if the practice of approving reading materials that reflect only one approach is allowed to continue this practice could lead to reading problems that may have a profound effect on children's later progress in school. It is for these reasons that the Section endorses the following statements.

* Resolved that ministries (departments) of education across Canada provide school districts with a balanced selection of offerings in the Language Arts curriculum. This call for balance means that both bottom-up, code-emphasis programs, as well as top-down, meaning-emphasis programs, should appear on the lists of approved textbook materials.

* Resolved that school psychologists encourage teachers, primary consultants, etc. to select beginning reading materials that match children's needs. For some children this selection might entail the use of materials from either meaning-emphasis or code-emphasis programs whereas for other children the selection might call for a combination of

materials from both programs.

The author acknowledges with appreciation the very helpful comments by Mary Ann Evans, Che Kan Leong, and Michael Rodda on an earlier draft of this paper. Reprints may be obtained by contacting the author at the Department of Psychology, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario N6A 5C2.

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(Editor's Note: Copies of this position paper on beginning reading instruction were mailed to the ministry of education in each province as well as to the media in April. The paper was also announced in the Spring, 1993. issue of Psynopsis and appeared in a some what expanded form in the Spring, 1993 issue of the Canadian Journal of School Psychology (9, 96-99). Since then the Canadian Psychological Association has received over 200 requests for copies. In view of the public's interest in the paper coupled with the importance of the issued that it addresses the CJSP version is being reprinted (with permission) in order to

make the paper more readily accessible to the public. Comments should be directed to the author:

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